



# THE **Blues** musicians

**T**he following profiles describe the lives and music of some of the most influential blues musicians. Their lives were often reflected in their songs.

**BESSIE SMITH** Bessie Smith was known as the “Empress of the Blues,” and with her warm vibrato and impassioned delivery, she deserves this title. Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1894, she grew up singing gospel music in church. Throughout her career, her famous blues renditions reflected this powerful musical influence. As the new industry of recorded music grew in the 1920s, she began recording. In 1923, her hit song “Down Hearted Blues” sold over two million records. In 1925, she recorded “Careless Love Blues,” which featured a young Louis Armstrong on cornet. In this song, Bessie sings a line and Armstrong answers her with a soulful phrase from his horn, in the old call-and-response pattern. Bessie Smith died on Sept. 26, 1937 after a car accident in northern Mississippi. She had been refused admittance to the first hospital she was taken to because of her race.

One night, I was layin' down, I heard  
Mama and Papa talkin, I heard Papa tell  
Mama: Let that boy boogie woogie,  
cause it's in him and it got to come out!

—from “Boogie Chillen,” JOHN LEE HOOKER  
MODERN RECORDS, NOV., 1948

**JOHN LEE HOOKER** Over his long career, John Lee Hooker brought a unique “boogie” style to the blues. Born in 1917 in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Hooker’s early influences came from his father, a gospel preacher, and his step-father, who gave him his first guitar. Like many other southern blacks, he eventually left the rural South for the northern cities. He moved to Detroit in 1943, where he worked in auto and steel factories. In his first year of recording, 1948, he had a hit with “Boogie Chillen” and topped the charts again in 1951 with “I’m In the Mood.” From Detroit he went to Chicago, where he recorded more hit songs. In 1970, he moved to California, where he hooked up with young rock musicians and played blues for a new generation of listeners. In 1990, Hooker won a Grammy award for “The Healer,” a record that included guest musicians Carlos Santana, Keith Richards, and Bonnie Raitt among others. He also recorded several times with the Irish singer and songwriter Van Morrison. Hooker died in 2001.



**JOHN LEE HOOKER**

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**MUDDY WATERS** The originator of modern electric blues, Muddy Waters was born in Rolling Fork, Mississippi in 1915. He learned to play the guitar while working as a tractor driver, began recording acoustic blues in 1941, and moved to Chicago in 1943. By 1950 Muddy had put together his archetypal blues band, featuring Little Walter Jacobs on amplified harmonica and himself on electric guitar. Almost every Chicago blues musician of note played in Muddy’s band over the years, and many of his tunes, such as “Hoochie Coochie Man” and “Mannish Boy” are considered blues classics. He continued to give strong performances on both vocals and guitar until his death in 1983.

**ROBERT JOHNSON** The “King of the Delta Blues Singers,” Robert Johnson was also a master Delta blues guitarist. Born in Hazlehurst, Mississippi in 1911, he spent much of his short career playing at plantation dances and small bars in the Delta area of northwestern Mississippi. Johnson’s clever lyrics and deft guitar playing distinguish his work. He died in 1938. Some people believe he was poisoned by an angry lover, but the exact circumstances of his death are still hazy. Johnson influenced many guitarists, including Elmore James and Muddy Waters, who took the Delta “bottleneck” slide style to the city and amplified it. Some of Johnson’s songs, such as “Crossroads” and “Love in Vain,” were recorded later by rock bands.



**MUDDY WATERS**

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I bought you a new car, and you said, "I want a Cadillac."  
Bought you a ten-dollar dinner, and you said, "Thanks for the snack."  
I let you live in my penthouse, you said it was a shack.  
I gave you seven children, and now you want to give 'em back.

HOW BLUE CAN YOU GET • B. B. King

# THE KING OF THE **Blues**



The best known blues musician today is **B. B. King,**

and this gentleman's fame is well-deserved. Born in Indianola, Mississippi in 1925, he earned the nickname "B. B." ("blues boy") while playing on radio programs in Memphis, Tennessee, where, like many other Mississippi Delta blacks, he moved during World War II. From the 1940s through the 1960s, he played mostly in clubs in the South that, due to segregation, had only black audiences. In 1948, he had a hit record with "Three A.M. Blues" and toured steadily thereafter. His fame spread as he played at blues festivals, concert halls, universities, and on television shows across the country. No other blues artist has worked harder than B. B. King in his many years of playing over three hundred shows a year.



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B.B. King at the Montreux Jazz Festival (above)  
'Mister Blues' B.B. King enjoys a playful moment with blues fans at the 32nd Montreux Jazz Festival in Montreux, Switzerland in 1998.

By the late 1960s, B. B. had perfected his famous guitar style of vibrating the fingers of his left hand as he played and bending notes to achieve the blue notes that are such an integral part of blues music. This singing guitar sound, coupled with his expressive tenor voice, brought King great success in 1969 with his recording of "The Thrill Is Gone." The song broke through the limited sales of the blues market to achieve mainstream success and brought B. B. a Grammy award.

B. B.'s songs display a wide range of emotions, in addition to the sadness so fundamental to blues music. In the lyrics above, we hear his sense of humor in "How Blue Can You Get." He combines humor with a keen understanding of human nature in "Everybody Lies a Little Sometimes."

King's long and distinguished career includes many musical collaborations. Young rock musicians, in particular, appreciate his contributions to their genre. In 1988 B.B. played guitar and sang on the hit song "When Love Comes to Town" by the Irish band U2. In 2001 he recorded an award-winning record with Eric Clapton called "Riding With the King." King's guitar work has had a strong influence on thousands of guitar soloists and, to this day, he remains the blues' greatest ambassador.

Some people never see their  
lies as lies,  
They just see the truth, the  
truth in disguise...  
I've been told that lying  
is wrong,  
It's alright with me if it  
saves your life or your home.

EVERYBODY LIES A LITTLE SOMETIMES • B. B. King